

## THE FIRST NEWS OF THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

by Dr Douglas J Austin      08      [ TWC 24(2) p44 2006 ]

On 14th November, 1854, "*The Times*" of London printed William Howard Russell's sensational report of the Battle of Balaklava, a landmark in the history of war journalism. The questions arise:- How and when did "official" Britain first hear of the near-destruction of the Light Brigade of Cavalry? What details were then available?

On page 277 of his fine book "*Crimea*" (Abacus, London, 2000), Trevor Royle quotes from an extract written by "*an un-named staff officer*" and enclosed in a letter from Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, British Ambassador in Constantinople, to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon. Royle's references lead to two letters and one enclosure in The National Archives, Kew - FO 78/1004 622 and 639. These full transcriptions are published in accord with The National Archives guidelines and my notes are presented, in italics, as follows:

FO 78/1004 622 (1 Letter: 2 pages.)

Therapia, October 28th 1854

My Lord,

I have received no official intelligence from the Crimea since I last had the honour of addressing Your Lordship.

The Captain of a French vessel, which came in this morning, having left the Coast on Thursday the 26th instant, reports that the Russians, in considerable force, had made a strong attack on the rear of the French position near Sebastopol, the Turkish troops, in station there, having given way with a loss of two guns. (7 guns were lost.)

It appears that the Russians were subsequently repulsed; it is, moreover, stated that a regiment of British Cavalry, charging upon their retreat, had experienced a heavy loss. The siege is described as advancing steadily. The French lines had been worked to a distance of four hundred metres from the Russian batteries. The wandering nature of the Russian fire indicated a deficiency of artillery men, and the necessity of supplying their loss by infantry. The town was greatly injured; the inhabitants were suffering severely; the scarcity of water was a cruel addition to their miseries. Admiral Corniloff (sic) is reported to have been killed. (*Kornilov died on 17th October, 1854.*)

Your Lordship will understand that I cannot vouch for the correctness of these reports. True or false, the impression still prevails that the Allied armies will finally succeed in carrying the place, though not perhaps, without a second, or even a third assault, owing to the nature of the ground, which, as it has been described to me, is highly favourable to the besieged.

I have the honour to be with the greatest respect, My Lord,  
Your Lordships  
Most obedient  
Humble servant  
Stratford de Redcliffe

(To) The Right Honable The Earl of Clarendon K.G

FO 78/1004 639 (1 Cover page + 1 Letter + 1 enclosure)

(Letter 2: 1 Cover page)

1854 Therapia            October 31st    Viscount Stratford    No 639  
Confidential            One Inclosure recd - 12 Nov By (illegible) Tindall  
Incloses extract of a private letter of the late occurrences near Sevastopol.  
War Dept Capt (illegible) No 12/54 C    2236

(This letter and enclosed extract arrived in London on 12th November, 1854, only two day's before "The Times" published its account.)

My Lord,

The absence of official advices from the Crimea may excuse me for sending, enclosed herewith, to Your Lordship a narrative of the late occurrences near Sevastopol extracted from a private letter, which I have only this moment received. Though I do not feel at liberty to mention my correspondent's name, I rely implicitly on his character for that correctness which is essential, and also for his access to the best sources of information.

I have the honour to be with  
The greatest respect, my Lord,  
Your Lordship's  
Most obedient  
Humble Servant  
Stratford de Redcliffe  
Confidential

(It is unclear why Stratford chose not to name his correspondent. Sir Hugh Henry Rose, Queen's Commissioner at French Headquarters, was very well known to Lord Stratford and remains an obvious well-placed candidate.)

(Letter 2: Extract: 8 pp.)

Extract

October 27th 1854

We are busily employed, and it will need the best energies of all to terminate our operations with success. Circumstances required that our attack should be made on the South side instead of the North, which I always thought would have given us less trouble, and a less extensive base to work upon. (*An interesting comment on the controversial "Flank March" to Balaklava.*)

When I tell you, that, at present, from our extreme right before Sebastopol to the extreme left of the French resting upon the sea, the distance is not under 8 miles, you can judge of the difficulties we have to contend with in resisting attacks from the fortress. Added to our position of besiegers, we have now sustained a spirited attack upon Balaklava by a Russian force of 15,000 Infantry and 3,000 Cavalry with many guns; this occurred on the 25th and I grieve to say has been attended with very serious loss to our Light Brigade of Cavalry. (The Russian forces were some 25,000 Infantry, 34 squadrons of Cavalry and 78 guns.)

Balaklava was defended by a force consisting of 1200 Marines and one regiment (93rd) of Infantry, along a front of 3 miles; beyond which lies a plain, from 1½ to 2 miles in extent, rising to

a low crest of hills, upon which we had placed 5 Redoubts (open works) and a few guns. (*This suggests that all 4 of the "active " redoubts were "open works", i.e. open to the rear. Redoubt 5 was occupied in the later morning and Redoubt 6 was not built at this time.*)

In these, to defend them, were placed 5000 Turks, distributed along the height. (*The Turks in the Redoubts 1-4 numbered some 1300-1400 only, according to John Blunt, Lord Lucan's interpreter. The writer appears to be giving an approximate total number of Turkish troops recently sent to Balaklava, including some 4000 high-grade troops placed to the rear of the French before Sevastopol.*)

On the advance of a strong Russian force of Cavalry, our Turkish friends took to their heels, and fell back on the 93rd, who were formed in line with a Turkish battalion on either flank. (*The Turks in Redoubt 1 (Canrobert's Hill) resisted bravely and were forced out, with heavy losses, by the Russians.*)

The Russians advanced upon the 93rd who were deserted by their friends on both flanks; and thus left alone, to meet the Russians, they stood firm as a rock, received them in line, and gave them such a volley as made the Russians retreat. Upon this, our heavy Cavalry made a most brilliant charge, and quite successful, as the enemy began to retire on all points. (*The expression "quite successful" could refer to the failure of the Light Brigade to follow up the success of the Heavy Brigade.*)

Now comes the sad part of the affair; our Brigade of Light Cavalry was upon our left, orders were sent to them to "follow the enemy", hanging upon his flank and rear, so as to take advantage to charge. (*This can be read to imply orders to cross the Causeway Heights and to advance along the South Valley, rather than the North, to prevent the removal of British guns from Redoubts 1-4. Doubtful and risky instructions, if so, given the rough or boggy ground south of Redoubt 4 and south-west of Redoubts 3 and 2 - shown in Beatty's Railway Map of 13th April, 1855 [Philip Marsh, "Beatty's Railway", New Cherwell Press, Oxford, 2000.] This order was, either, misunderstood, or delivered incorrectly by poor Captain Nolan (already, Nolan is blamed); and the Light Cavalry made a most gallant but disastrous charge thro' three lines of the Russian force and passed a battery of seven guns, cutting down all the gunners. (There were eight 18-pounder guns in the Don Heavy Battery No 3. The total number of guns charged by the Light Brigade varies from 8 to 12, depending on the teller. The eight guns of the 12th Light Horse Artillery were placed to the north of the Don Heavy Battery before the advance. [Kulikov, Conrad and Robins, "The War Correspondent", Vol 23(1), 2005, 9- 16.]*)

To return was another thing; and out of between 6 and 700 men, who charged, only 180 came back. A few stragglers came in the following day, about 120; so that our loss is upwards of 350 to 400 Cavalry and some guns, which the Turks had charge of, on the heights. (*Mark Adkin's book "The Charge" (Pimlico, London, 2004) states that the Light Brigade losses amounted to 103 killed in action, 137 wounded (7 died later) and 58 taken prisoner from a total of some 664 who charged. Thus, about 366 men survived, unwounded and free. I know of no reports of "stragglers " returning on the 26th October, the day of "Little Inkerman ".*)

Captain Nolan and young Charteris were killed, a great many officers missing or prisoners, but I do not know the exact details.

On the 26th the Russians made a sortie from the town with 3000 Infantry and six guns upon our right. They were met by the 2nd and 1st divisions, supported by the light division and 24 guns, which sent the enemy down the hill faster than he came up. Their loss was severe 500 killed and 300 we took prisoners, 2 officers (*sic*) among them; our loss was one killed and ten wounded. Lord

Dunkellin was made prisoner on the 22nd. The officer, who had taken him, was made prisoner on the 26th. Gortchakoff, they told us, was wounded.

It had been once a question of giving up Balaklava, but I am happy to say, that, instead of that, we are strengthening our defences there and have sent 400 more seamen on shore to assist. (*Preparations to abandon Balaklava harbour were indeed made.*)

We are very short of troops, to defend our besieging position, and that of Balaklava, which is the point from which provisions, ammunition, &c, &c are sent to the army.

And now a word about the sea attack of the 17th which, I fear, did little permanent mischief to the batteries on shore. It was difficult to squeeze 24 ships of the line into the small space from which a real effective fire would be poured upon the batteries. (*A useful confirmation of the failure of the sea bombardment. Some ships were firing at too long a range to be effective.*)

What was possible was done most gallantly by Sir E. Lyons, supported by the Sans Pareil (*Sanspareil*), Albion, London and, later in the day, by the Bellerophon and Rodney, which last ship grounded immediately ahead of the Agamemnon. Our loss was severe 45 killed and 264 wounded; many have died since. The ships were a good deal knocked about, but are now all patched and ready for work again. Some of the French ships were a good deal struck; the Ville de Paris (Admiral Hamelin) had 3 shell exploded under the poop which blew it almost off, and killed and wounded his 4 aide de camps. Their loss is estimated to have been 40 killed and 200 wounded.

I hope that we are not far from seeing Sebastopol fall. It must be done by assault or not at all. I think that both armies are in good spirits, and feel that the bayonet is the only weapon to open a passage for them. It may happen any day, I think, after this.

Our casualties in the trenches have been few, considering that we have been 10 days firing at them. Their fire does not cease, and when we knock over a gun, it is soon replaced.

The weather continues to be beautiful, and the Russians kindly permit us to get water from the Katsha (Katcha). Eupatoria is still in our hands, but I understand there is a Russian force of 4 or 5,000 men outside, and they have driven in the Tartars from the neighbourhood.

Conclusion:-

Certainly, there are some deviations from (presently accepted) fact but it would be good to know who wrote this interesting Extract and to have the original full text, which must have been written in the period from the 25th to, say, the 30th October, 1854. That original may not have survived and, as archived, the Extract is in the handwriting of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe. My tentative identification of the correspondent as Sir Hugh Henry Rose finds some support in Stratford's advice of "his access to the best sources of information" and to its high-level tone and the strategic comments with which it begins.